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### Oil and Water in America's Melting Pot:

Is politically fuelled interstate migration causing a fracture in American diversity?

As a Florida native, I've taken pride in many southern charms the sunshine state is best known for. Beautiful beaches, Publix Subs, a collective disdain for snowbirds. Despite a penchant for disastrous hurricanes, alongside humidity akin to a sauna that would have the most seasoned Finn saying "uncle", Floridians would happily defend their lifestyle and culture to the alligator-ridden death.

But as I grew, so did my views of the world. Unfortunately, many of which not so in line with a once-welcoming community. Over time, hot button issues began to permeate everyday life. More and more, bigots and vaccine-deniers felt emboldened, and to me, any notion of critical thinking through means of a contrary argument became something to be ashamed of. This wasn't the Florida that I knew and loved.

In the summer of '22, the stars aligned and I was offered an opportunity to leave this husk of what once was true southern hospitality. Naturally, I took it. Bittersweet, but all the more cathartic.

It's now early 2025 and as a newly-minted Washington resident, I've never been happier. This chapter in my life has left me with one glaring question: I couldn't be the only one doing this, right? Are people increasingly uprooting their lives in search of a community that better fits their views and beliefs as a primary factor? A few Google searches brought me to the flagship term for this phenomenon: The Big Sort, or Americans migrating in search of communities more aligned with their cultural and political beliefs.

Coined in Bill Bishop's 2009 book *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart*, Bishop initially came to this label while witnessing how migratory streams were reshaping regional economies, bringing new cultural and political ideals along with them. A colleague noted that the zigzagging behavior of people and money looked like 'the big sort', which stuck.

This concept spurred a slew of oppressive questions, much like the unwavering heat I once knew. Is this phenomenon largely intentional? What consequences, both macro and micro, could we expect in the near future? Just how heavily has this impacted the country to date?

Unsure of where to begin with what seemed like a nebulous concept, I decided to consult a librarian at Bellevue College. I booked an appointment for later that morning and began scrambling to articulate how to adequately describe the topic at hand.

Fortunately, a steeled veteran of the literary arts managed to quell my impending breakdown with a simple starting point: Keywords. We began spit balling various phrases with a tangible goal in mind, some sort of high-level overview. First, I'd have to explain this phenomenon in simple, digestible terms, then take smaller steps to better form an outline.

"The Big Sort" alongside other broad terms such as "Political motivation" and "economic impacts" worked in tandem to reveal new, more concise keywords, in turn providing more relevant results. This eventually landed me with my first intellectual diamond in the rough: a phrase with equal parts punch and accuracy, "Affective Polarization". The scholarly article showcasing this term was *The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States* by Shanto Iyengar, Yphtach Lelkes, Matthew Levendusky, Neil Malhotra, and Sean J. Westwood.

This article describes the slowly converging relationship between political partisanship and social identity, noting how throughout recent years, political views have crept into how we view ourselves, others, and social groups. This once-firm line has blurred, fostering a pressure cooker of animosity toward 'the other side', 'the left or the right', and furthermore, what people may view as 'the enemy'. The article later follows up with repercussions, such as distorting labor markets, altering economic behavior, and even dictating family dynamics in households.

Iyengar et al. (2012) notes "the percentage of Americans who would be somewhat or very unhappy if their child married someone of the opposite party has increased by about 35 percentage points over the last 50 years, with Republicans especially sensitive to cross-party marriage. These increases are much larger in the United States than in a similar advanced democracy, the United Kingdom.", reinforcing my thesis that political views are increasingly permeating most facets of life in the modern United States through this idea of affective polarization. Leaving the meeting with this article gave me a sense of confidence and motivation. I now had the tools through Bellevue College's invaluable article databases and my librarian's tutelage to fly on my own. And so I did.

New questions arose as I digested Iyengar and company's insight, and so I felt compelled to broaden my search a bit more. Sure, it's clear that those 'in the know' are actively cultivating their lives to better fit their political and cultural views, but what are the impacts of affective polarization on those ignorant of the concept? How many individuals migrate with a sort of subconscious political motivation?

A new literary goose chase led me to James Gimpel's *Inadvertent and Intentional Partisan Residential Sorting*.

In this article, Gimpel elaborates on two mechanisms that fuel migration within the United States, in turn causing a greater geographic divide of partisan preferences. While

intentional sorting is described as migration with partisanship as a direct motivator, inadvertent sorting covers a broader swath, migrations which lead to a result not achieved through deliberate planning.

Even when motivations differ, each serves as a catalyst to political and partisan homogenization: "Despite the difference in intention, both mechanisms produce the same result by increasing the spatial concentration of copartisans in specific locations." (Gimpel, 442)

Gimpel also references a work by Iyengar that further bolsters my hunch that the product of these migrations builds more intellectually isolated communities, shielding its constituents from opposing views and contrary opinions. "...the resulting biased opinion distributions are also believed to isolate individuals from alternative viewpoints; heightening extremism and intolerance for other groups, and producing increasing isolation and suspicion." (Iyengar, 2015)

My main takeaway from Gimpel's writing demonstrates how even in seemingly benign and well-intentioned cases, those of which appear devoid of any political motivation, recent state-to-state migrants play a surprisingly impactful role on the 'swing-factor' of states. This in turn drags once-battleground swing states into their respective political spectrum, providing a breeding ground for more extremist policy on the state and federal governance stages.

After spending a significant amount of time on the "cause" side of this topic, my curiosity began to creep. I decided to pursue insight into the implications of such behavior. How has this change affected communities' collective thought space? What real world examples are we living in due to The Big Sort? I was in no manner prepared for the scholarly avalanche pressing firmly on the other side of the door.

What I thought would be a harmless 'x causes y' event scenario devolved into a mental cork board turned pin cushion, linking near every significant event of the past decade to one another, all leading back to what I viewed as a central motivator for participants in The Big Sort: Social Media

In *A review and provocation: On polarization and platforms* by Daniel Kress, he posits that political identities map onto social groups, be it communities or cliques within social media platforms. These groups, in turn, amplify polarization, further empowering individuals to act on such beliefs, like migrating to more partisan-aligned areas.

Glaring examples sprang forth the further I delved. The murder of Trayvon Martin in the summer of 2013, which birthed the #BlackLivesMatter movement. "Black Lives Matter also provoked intense White “backlash” in the United States and beyond (Shahin et al., 2021—a recurring pattern, see Abrajano and Hajnal, 2015). Alongside the rise of Black Lives Matter, since 2014, “thin blue line” flags—symbols of solidarity with White police forces—began to grace Facebook pages, show up at Trump and Republican rallies and the Charlottesville “Unite the Right” rally, and fly on porches across White America (Shanahan and Wall, 2021)" (Kreiss, 2024). Hostility has since lulled, albeit marginally, but the thinking behind these movements has made it clear that it isn't going anywhere.

These platforms that were intended to provide a springboard, or voice, for the common individual have amalgamated into incubators for more extreme policy ideals and partisan thinking. Almost contrary to their intended purpose, they further divide social groups, incentivizing participation in The Big Sort through means of promises of a place to belong socially.

Spending time researching The Big Sort and its participants has left me with mixed emotions. On one hand, it's captivating seeing so many moving parts at work producing tangible, macro-level results in social political spheres. On the other, it feels like I'm peeking

through the keyhole into a raging, ignorant housefire, lit by a well-intentioned, yet misled populace.

Equal parts intriguing and dismal, like some sort of ethically-questionable science experiment, we're witnessing in real-time massive shifts socially, economically, and politically, stemming from the most primitive urge to be closer to, and belong to other like-minded individuals.

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